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ABSTRACT

The developmental task faced during adolescence is, in part, to find a self which is accepted as both authentic and genuinely recognized and valued by others. The graduate student in the American university is generally a young adult facing developmental tasks beyond those of adolescence. He is still vulnerable, however, to conflicts involving identity and role confusion if seemingly secure competencies and support become threatened and insecure. There are many of these anti-developmental features in graduate education and teaching assistantships (TA). (1) There is usually not enough opportunity for voluntary free choice of any kind in the TA's job. (2) He often finds nothing important or involving in his assigned or available duties. (3) His disposal to and interest in innovative and off-beat modes of instruction are generally ignored or neglected. (4) He often has limited appropriate interaction with and little support from the faculty. (5) In the classroom, he may misinterpret student feedback, and come to doubt his own competence. Graduate education should be changed so the TA can be: protected from these anti-developmental features; encouraged to become committed to significant tasks; and rewarded for good teaching. (AF)

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Group 33
Tuesday Morning, March 3

IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG TA's: THE ROLES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS*

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Several years ago Kenneth E. Clark, Miriam Rock, and I, with support from the Esso Education Foundation, prepared a report for our colleagues which the American Council on Education published as a monograph, The Graduate Student as Teacher. In preparing the report we consulted via interview and questionnaire with very many graduate and undergraduate students, with all departmental chairmen and some faculty. What we learned from them as well as from a group of graduate school deans from all over the country who twice assembled for two-day conferences in Rochester was selectively described in that monograph with a primary focus on the problem of how to provide more effective utilization and training of graduate students as teachers. Within this focus we formulated ten principles of effective graduate student teaching programs. These principles were not presented as norms or standards but rather as aids to the reader in gaining helpful perspectives on what might be good and on what might properly be improved in his own academic work with graduate students as teachers. In short, we proposed:

(1) A sequence of experiences in teaching, progressing from less demanding to more demanding tasks, wherever possible. (2) The elimination of blind alleys (e.g., semester after semester in the same lab course) and of assignment of menial or meaningless but necessary duties that can be carried out otherwise. (3) Opportunity for varied experience in teaching. (4) Opportunity to apply specialized disciplinary competence to teaching. (5) The identification and elimination from teaching of the mediocre assistant. (6) The guarantee of a three-to five-year program of support contingent on successful progress toward the degree. (7) The development and fostering of a climate of professional respect toward the teaching assistant. (8) The application by the university of adequate resources of all kinds to the training and supervision of TA's. (9) The providing of experiences in which the graduate student gains an understanding not only of teaching but also of the teaching profession. (10) The development of effective evaluation procedures.

That report contained all I had or cared to say about this important problem. At least I felt so until Kerry Smith asked me to reexamine the problem from the perspective of the concept of identity crisis. Since I have an interest in the psychology of personality development in the college years I accepted his request to take another look.

Our resource person in this discussion group, Professor Peter Loewenberg, has published an excellent analysis of graduate education written from the viewpoint of Freudian developmental theory with emphasis on the many ways unrecognized transference regression handicaps both the graduate student and his major professors. My own focus today is narrower--that is, on the graduate student as teacher--and the theory I attempt to apply is that Erikson, the creator of the neo-psychoanalytic term identity crisis and of the conceptual scheme within which the concept

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takes on its many special meanings.

Erikson helped to extend the science of human personality development from its earlier almost exclusive emphasis on very early life to the total life span. In doing so he identified a life-long sequence of developmental tasks, each of which was more or less characteristic of a particular phase or state of development. As the growing and aging individual copes with each of these sets of inexorable requirements imposed both by himself and his society, he can be expected to show varying degrees of success and failure in solving or surmounting them, with resulting enduring conflicts between the psychological consequences of both success and failure. One way to describe these psychological consequences it to call them psychosocial orientations or basic attitudes about one's self and one's relations with society. The familiar names of the first five of these complex orientations are trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority and, attendant on the developmental task of adolescence, identity versus role confusion.

The developmental task faced during adolescence is, in part, to find a self which is accepted as both authentic and as genuinely recognized and valued by significant others.

In the growing youngster a developmental crisis occurs whenever he perceives that his self-qualities at the time do not provide competence for the developmental task at hand. The special characteristic of the identity crisis (as developmental crisis) is that the individual for the first time feels that he is indeed not competent to carry out the adult roles available to him in the present or foreseeable future. Further formation of ego identity reduces the feelings of incompetence in his basic attitude and helps "solve" the identity crisis. If not solved, the basic attitude is relatively highly characterized by role confusion, with the individual finding no authentic self which can be accepted as competent in respect to the important available social roles. No matter how successful the initial coping with this adolescent developmental task and any attendant crisis, later stresses and strains in life can redintegrate the identity versus role-confusion conflict and the crisis with its associated feelings of incompetence for career and other adult roles. Thus the Eriksonian scheme makes us aware of the possible consequences of conflicts formed not only early in life, as in the Freudian scheme, but also of those formed later in life.

Now as we look at the graduate student in the American university we see a young adult who is usually facing developmental tasks beyond those of adolescence and of the search for identity. But he is still vulnerable to time-consuming and debilitating conflicts involving identity and role confusion if competencies and supports once seemingly secure become threatened or insecure. In a sense, then, he is still forming his identity, a process helped, in part, by two important factors: (1) his sense of voluntary commitment to activities and values he believes really important and (2) his sense of receiving relevant support from significant others who share these values with him.

One of Professor Loewenberg's main points was that, within the Freudian scheme, there are many features of graduate education which are anti-developmental--that is, as he says, "rather than fostering growth, together they too often work to counter it and perpetuate a psychology of domination (by professor) and infantilization (of student)." Within the Eriksonian concept of an enduring and at least dispositional conflict between identity and role confusion, what are the

academic features which are anti-developmental for the graduate student as teacher--which foster not further formation of ego identity but rather the prolongation or redintegration of the identity crisis?

(1) There is usually not enough opportunity for voluntary free choice of any kind in the teaching assistantship. In Childhood and Society (2nd edition, p.286), Erikson says: "The process of American identity formation seems to support an individual's ego identity as long as he can preserve a certain element of deliberate tentativeness of autonomous choice. The individual must be able to convince himself that the next step is up to him and that no matter where he is staying or going he always has the choice of leaving or turning in the opposite direction if he chooses to do so." But, as Professor Loewenberg says: "The student is frustrated in matters of participation in decisions governing his life. In the most important matters relating to his vocational goals and future he is in a dependent position."

(2) A very important process in all personality development is emotional involvement with important tasks and satisfying success and an awareness of growth by virtue of having been competent with them. Too often the teaching assistant, for good reasons or bad, finds nothing important or involving in his assigned or available duties.

(3) With respect to both freedom of choice and emotional involvement with task, we should also note that the graduate student usually shares more of the psychological world of the undergraduate than we do and undoubtedly sometimes feels disposed to engage in and test innovative and off-beat modes of instruction, a disposition of great potential value to the university but all too often neglected.

(4) Personality development at all stages depends on appropriate interaction with and support from the social environment. Ego identity requires support in the form of reward for competence, provision of highly competent adult models for identification and of interesting and inspiring ideologies to study and among which to choose. Our graduate teaching assistants tell us, however, that their rewards even for outstanding competence are meager and even incongruous when viewed in relation to the professional nature of their teaching duties. Nationally we find that there is very little effective support by professor for teaching assistant in the form of training, supervision and evaluation. There are too few outstandingly good teachers to identify with as teachers. Finally, the ideology of the professional educator, in so far as it is known to them at all, is viewed as boring orthodoxy.

(5) The classroom itself may provide antidevelopmental features. The TA may, sometimes correctly, sometimes incorrectly, assume that the undergraduate initially and thereafter perceives him as less than competent because of his non-faculty status. Moreover, especially in beginning to teach, he may not have learned to interpret correctly or even attend to the feed-back he does get from his students. (Our studies showed that sometimes there is much that is positive and thus potentially rewarding in that feedback). Finally, he will sooner or later encounter undergraduates who are both smarter and more aggressive than he. Such encounters, particularly if for other reasons he has doubts about his work or about his teaching competence, will call up still further questions about competence for career roles.

As I review the ten principles mentioned earlier, I find that they did have some implications for this problem of anti-developmental features which redintegrate or prolong identity crisis in the graduate student as teacher. Perhaps we were saying, after listening to so many of these graduate students, that we agree that we must learn how to change graduate education so that we can better protect, encourage and care for them as teachers. With Professor Loewenberg, we recognize that such changes, in some of their manisfestations, might be viewed as exactly the regressive nurturance the overdependent student craves. The problem is to make the changes pro- rather than anti-developmental.

(1) Protect, by reducing antidevelopmental features wherever identified.

(2) Encourage, through opening up opportunities for voluntary assignments, improvizations, innovations and autonomous emotional commitment to important, difficult, appropriate tasks.

(3) Care for, by having the university in all of its real and symbolic wealth put greater value on teaching.

Obviously both Professor Loewenberg and I are calling for changes in graduate education which would help produce stronger young adults as well as better teachers. Is this irrelevant? Is this impossible?